

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

April 26, 2009 in City

Patients' graves get markers

Group fights stigma of mental illness

Kathleen Merryman
(Tacoma) News Tribune



On April 8, Laurel Lemke, standing, and Rosemary Chaput examine a memorial their group installed in 2006 at Western State Hospital Cemetery.

STEILACOOM, Wash. – For 77 years, patients who died at Western State Hospital were buried in graves marked only by numbers stamped in bricks of cement.

It wasn't about money. It was about shame.

And it was about the law.

The state sought to protect families from the stigma of their relatives' mental illness by barring state psychiatric hospitals from putting names on the graves.

Five years ago, the volunteers of Grave Concerns Association persuaded the Legislature to lift that ban. Ever since, they have been restoring the Western State Hospital Cemetery. They have a solid start on honoring the 3,218 buried there. To date, they have installed more than 120 individual markers bearing names and birth and death dates. They've placed another 500 markers over the site where 500 patients' cremated remains were buried.

They have done all this without state money.

They have done it with donations and bulb sales and the occasional grant – all to show that there is no shame to mental illness.

"This is not about the dead," said Rosemary Chaput, the group's treasurer. "This is about the living."

Life surrounds the graveyard in what is now Fort Steilacoom Park. All around it are playgrounds, ballfields, a dog park, walking trails.

Prairie grasses grow inside a perimeter defined by hedges and a split-rail fence. Grape hyacinths planted by schoolchildren bloom purple under that fence.

Laurel Lemke, chairwoman of Grave Concerns, had worked at Western State for years before she knew where the cemetery was. Grass had overtaken and buried the old cement markers.

People used it as an unofficial dog park.

"In the summer, people would come here and park under the trees, not knowing there was a cemetery here," she said.

The only clue was the uneven ground where soil settled around disintegrating coffins.

Colleague John Lucas showed Lemke the cemetery in 2000. They pledged to restore it, and, with the help of Sherry Storms and Stacie Larson, worked with legislators Mike Carrell and Karen Fraser to get the simple permission to show patients' names.

They struck up a partnership with the owners of Tacoma Monument, which is now Premier Memorial. Anyone can buy squares of granite engraved with a patient's name, dates and the number on the original marker.

They invite school groups, service clubs, Scouts and members of the military to help maintain the site, and to install markers.

"Every time we bring someone out here, we talk about mental health," Lemke said.

They discuss post-traumatic stress disorder with veterans.

They tell young people that, even without modern psychiatric drugs, the men and women now buried there once ran a farm, built furniture and maintained the hospital.

They trace the history of treatment for mental illnesses from hydrotherapy, shock treatment and lobotomies to modern drugs that work.

Occasionally, they get calls from people who have a relative buried there. Always, they invite them to come visit. They use the GPS map that volunteer Jim Senko and city of Lakewood employee Lane DeLarme made to locate the grave.

They tell those families there is no shame to mental illness. It is as much a fact of life as arthritis or diabetes.

Lemke shares with them that her own bipolar disorder gives her special insight into the work she does with hospital residents.